

Swallow Enquiry

Title

Swallow Enquiry 1934-1935

Description and Summary of Results

The Swallow *Hirundo rustica* was considered to be the archetypal migrant and harbinger of spring. It also often nested close to humans and there appeared to be differences in numbers of fledged young both through the season and in different localities. Hence the then-fledgling BTO organised an enquiry to find out some specific information on these questions.

Twenty-two helpers took part in 1934, of which twelve made a census (several making a census only). In 1935 data were received from 16 of these and from 3 new ones. Sites ranged from central Scotland to southern England although there were no reports from the southwest peninsular.

Over both years 2260 broods were examined and of these about 2% contained one young, 6% contained two, 15-18% three, just under 40% four, just over 30% five and 3% six. In all around 5000 young were ringed or counted with an average of 4.0 to 4.1 young per brood. The first broods (June and July) were almost always the largest with the highest average found in the most northerly of the localities recorded.

The first egg was found in 1935 in late April but most first eggs were in the first half of May, and did not seem to be influenced by latitude or altitude. A variable proportion of nests were used more than once per season, with no obvious pattern. The usual clutch was five eggs. Nesting sites of the great majority were associated with domestic animals, of which cows were favourites. Rats and mice were responsible for most damage and a variety of parasites and other animals were found to live in nests. Full details are in the published reports.

Twelve areas were censused in 1934 and 11 in 1935 (7 in both years). These ranged from an island, cattle-raising country and arable farming, coastal village, a fruit-growing district, north-country industrial area and moorland at altitudes from sea-level to 1450 feet (450m). Swallows favoured rural areas with suitable buildings for their nests with the density varying from over 40 pairs in 400ha in farming districts of Norfolk and Anglesey, 20-25 pairs in cattle areas of W England and Wales to 2-5 pairs per 400ha in the Lake District, industrial urban areas and heathland and downland. In contrast House Martins concentrated in groups, were more generally distributed, and more were in urban and suburban areas. They were absent from some apparently suitable areas, but abundant in others far outnumbering the more scattered Swallows.

Methods of Data Capture

Observers were asked to send in details of all Swallow nests found in an area and to describe the habitat of that area – altitude, type of agriculture and whether rural or urban. Some supplementary questions were asked, answers for which could be conveniently investigated at the same time: dates of first and last eggs and broods; proportion of nests

used more than once in a season; the relation of Swallows with domestic animals, destructive creatures and other species of birds that usurp their nests; their association with House Martins *Delichon urbicum*; the prevalence of parasites (species and their effect on their hosts); size of clutch and subsequent size of brood; and local weather notes. Observers were also asked to conduct a census of the pairs of Swallows and House Martins nesting in a defined area.

Purpose of Data Capture

The main object was to establish the average size of broods in each summer month and in different localities, comparing altitude, type of agriculture and whether rural or urban. The second object was to census Swallows nesting in widely separated localities to see if any principles governing their distribution could be found.

Geographic Coverage

All of Great Britain.

Temporal Coverage

The breeding seasons of 1934 and 1935.

Other Interested parties

A W Boyd organised and ran the survey with the support of the BTO.

Organiser(s)

A W Boyd

Current Staff Contact

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Publications

The main reports of the survey are:

Boyd, A.W. 1935. Report on the Swallow enquiry, 1934. *British Birds* 29: 3-21; and Boyd, A.W. 1936. Report on the Swallow enquiry, 1935. *British Birds* 30: 98-116.

The survey was noticed in *BTO Annual Report* numbers 1, 2 and 3 (a 4 page summary); and *BTO Bulletin* numbers 1 and 4.

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

None.

Computer data -- outline contents

N/A.

Computer data -- description of contents

N/A.

Information held in BTO Archives

Nothing found.

Notes on Access and Use

Other information

Notes on Survey Design

Specific Issues for Analysis